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## Thriving Toddlers and their Attentive Fathers and Grandfathers around the Globe during a *Day in their Lives*

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### Abstract

Fathers' interactions with their children have been relatively understudied and their contributions to child development have, in consequence, been somewhat undervalued. Recently, studies have explored a shift in the role of fathers in Italy and elsewhere (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2010; Klein et al, 2005). We have observed, through an innovative visual methodology, thriving thirty-month-old girls, also an understudied population, during one *Day in their Lives* (Gillen & Cameron, 2010). Variations between families in the masculine nurturance of their children can be expected, depending on personal characteristics, gender, family structures, and cultural contexts in which they are situated. The present ecological research observes four toddlers in Italy, the UK, Peru and Thailand wherein transactions between them and their fathers and grandfathers were observed, described and analyzed during one *day in their lives*. In this paper we only discuss one of them. The study is qualitative, focusing on probing the nature of the exchanges between family members, to gain an understanding the dynamic nature of their interchanges. The case study of this little girl demonstrates agency in her interactions with her caregiver and the caregiver showed a highly promotive (Sameroff, 2010) nurturant style.

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## 1. Introduction

Fathers of preschoolers are not so well studied as mothers; and are sometimes an undervalued force in healthy family functioning (Amato, 1998; Harmon & Perry, 2011). Historically, fathers have most notably contributed to the economic wellbeing of their families (Lamb, 2010); we have data that they model morals (Parke, 2006),

encourage persistence (Padilla-Walker, Day, Dyer & Black, 2012), perceptions of acceptance (Khaleque & Rohmer, 2012), contribute to gender schemata (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002); and engage their children in rough and tumble activities (Fletcher, 2008): They famously play and communicate actively with their children (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). But what other roles in nurturance do they serve in the lives of their very young children? This study set out to document responses to this question.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Participants

Four thriving 30-month old toddlers from different locations around the globe were recruited for this visual socio-ecological study. All were girls because the experience of early female development is understudied (Cunningham, 2006). These children were videotaped at home for an entire *Day in their Lives*. The methodology for the research is described in Gillen et al., 2007. In this paper we only discuss one child, the child in Italy. In our World Conference on Educational Sciences in Rome 5 February 2013 presentation we discuss all four girls who live in Peru, Thailand, and the UK as well as Italy. Three of the children have grandfathers in their homes. A journal article discussing all four toddlers is in preparation.

Beatrice (a pseudonym) commences her day with her father attentively caring for her in a small flat in northern Italy. Her mother is at work for the first several hours of our investigation. Father spends his time fully engaged with Bea. Although he often defers to her mother on her return from work, he also seems very comfortable assuming the lead in many subsequent transactions throughout the day.

## 3. Findings In Italy

In order to explore fathers as representatives, and as mediators of family values from an international perspective, we first adopted observation of the everyday activities of this middle-class, dual-income Italian family: Beatrice and her parents live in a major northern city, where both the mother and the father teach music in the local Musical Lyceum. The family has in a small urban flat where there are an abundance of toys, books and musical activities available. She appears comfortable in the care of either parent, spending a substantial amount of time in the company of her father early in the day of our observations. Later in the day, both parents are engaged with the child. Analyzing the *DITL* Italian data, we find various episodes in which the father interacts with Bea: we choose an eating episode, given the high potentiality of eating practices to provide the context for rich affective exchanges, especially in Italy (Gillen, Cameron, Tapanya, Pinto, Hancock, Young & Accorti Gamannossi, 2007; Pontecorvo et al., 2001).

The eating event, the midday meal takes place in the kitchen: Bea is sitting in her small chair safely anchored to the kitchen table. Lucia, her mother, has cooked pasta for Bea, and is now preparing food for the adults' meal. We are thus confronted with the father, Claudio who engages in childcare alongside the mother: the episode shows how

father actively participates in childcare activities, contributing to the child's development and adjustment.

In the selected sequence, Claudio guides Bea's meal, talking with her and encouraging her to feed herself using a fork. He assists Bea, showing her how to handle the fork and how to blow on the pasta to reduce its heat. The way in which the father prepares and serves Bea her food provides insight on how he comfortably accepts his performance of tasks traditionally attributed to women. Claudio serves as a support and guide for the child during her activities at home mainly through a frame of explicitly ascribing meaning to what he does with Bea, naming objects and actions, commenting their properties and functions. Father explains his own actions: "Look, Bea, I'm putting cheese on the pasta, to make it more tasty!" He comments on activities as they are carried out.

In the passage investigated here, he transmits to Bea cultural expectations of the fundamental role certain artifacts play in his actions and how these expectations are also important to how a 2-and-a-half-year-old child is expected to enjoy eating. If we focus mainly on language use, we see that the conversations between Father and Bea provide the child with reasons for which various items (fork, dish, vase, etc.) and gestures are included too: i.e. "Please, Bea, take the vase with two hands, to make you sure the water will not pour out..." "Look, Bea, you do have to blow, otherwise the pasta will be too hot!" The father provides Bea with his particular repertoire in terms of the rules, words and concepts that are relevant within the particular practice in which they are involved.

The interaction between Bea and her father during the mealtime also shows an overall organization in which much turn taking is present and father actively promotes processes that stimulate Bea's knowledge and opinions: the father tastes the food, expressing his appreciation, and Bea feeds him with her pasta, smiling and laughing. By the way his body and his gaze are directed, the father clearly show his role as active partner in socialization.

Bea and her father jointly produce a meaningful, coherent episode of "nurturing and being nurtured". A configuration emerges in which the two partners are active together, with highly interactive availability: the father clearly focuses on the meal, and he and Bea share the same centre of interest, a common focus.

In the observed situation the father chooses to function in actions conventionally perceived as "feminine", and he is clearly "exposed" to his wife's observation throughout. Father and child dynamically construct the event, as members of that specific social configuration in which the dyad performs social acts, in apparent accord with the other member of the family's (namely, the mother's) everyday expectations. The father seems to conform to the family requirements, and the child comfortably recognizes and responds to his actions. The mother does not assist, respecting the father's primary role attributed to him in the context. The father independently decides how to feed Bea, directing with a certain degree of freedom the events connected to the meal.

Nevertheless, he appears to keep in mind that the father-child dyad is part of the father-mother-child global family system. This emerges from frequent mentions of the mother's contribution to the quality of the food Bea is eating and to the fact she is in the meanwhile preparing food for dinner: Lucia, preparing the food to be put in the oven, comments, "How crazy I am! I forgot to put the salt!" and Claudio says, smiling to Bea: "Mami is very able in preparing the sauce!" His behaviour is also confirmed in the mother's actions: she asks him about the amount of pasta Bea has eaten, and appears confident in Claudio's answer: "Enough!" according him the status of arbiter of the family's values and standards.

From this, and from his engagement in the child's feeding it would be possible to imagine that the father perceives himself as a person capable of shouldering both typically masculine as well as typically feminine gender roles, keeping a broad perspective on the integration between his and the mother's role. Father's words often address Bea's concerns, flexibly orienting his actions on her possible intentions or needs. And Bea is offered the opportunity to accept or to refuse father's suggested practices, as when Bea shows her tiredness, repeatedly rubbing her fists on her closed eyes, Claudio, with a tender voice, suggests she will be soon in her 'soft little bed'. During this exchange, the father leans in toward Bea and they look into each other's eyes during their verbal interchange. Here one observes

that both members of the pair are attuned on an affective level. Attachment security (authors 2010) can be assumed.

#### 4. Discussion

In Italy, the fatherhood we document demonstrates an affective atonement to the child that implies the presence of that “emotional” intelligence, traditionally considered as an exclusively feminine trait. The father's presentation to the observers of himself and of his role seems to represent his positive relationship both with the mother and with his child. Overall the qualitative analysis of interactions shows how this Italian father is an active partner in different activities at home: we can see how Bea and her father jointly construct the feeding sequence suggesting how fathers' ways of cooperation in family routines have changed over time in Italy. This father actively functions within the family and gets involved in the development of his child's personality and relational capacities, which according to these parents had in previous generations been regarded in their families of origin as an exclusively maternal domain.

Recently, within the Italian context, some psychological studies have emphasized a progressive shift from a profile of the detached and absent father embodying power and family authority, and confined to the role of economic provider, towards the idea of a “new father” (Arcidiacono et al. 2006). According to these researchers, fathers' positioning over recent decades is characterized by a transition from a traditional fatherly image as provider to a more modern function as collaborator within the family, although this new image of fatherhood derives from a process that is still perhaps in the making (Ficeto 2000).

A comparative study conducted among Italian and US families (Klein et al. 2005) revealed that many Italian fathers are rather active in getting breakfast and dinner ready, showing an attitude of reciprocity in their relationships with their partner. More recently, Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo (2010) observed that Italian fathers they studied “actually take on manifold positions within the family participation structure. ...in looking carefully at our present data, we find that the above presented Italian fathers that we observed during few whole days of domestic life are collaborative in cooking duties and sometimes appear as being really experts in the field.” (p. 468).

Our data reported above, we find this observation veridical. However, we have other interesting examples of fathers and grandfathers that are not so representative of this shift in engagement and will report them at the World Conference on Educational Sciences conference in Rome in February and in a follow-up paper describing all four children currently under investigation.

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